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Aniruddhan Vasudevan

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**Stories as Capacious Objects: Narratives of Belonging in  
LGBT Community in Chennai, India**

**APPROVED BY  
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

**Supervisor:**

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**Kamran Ali**

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**Kathleen Stewart**

**Stories as Capacious Objects: Narratives of Belonging in  
LGBT Community in Chennai, India**

By

**Aniruddhan Vasudevan, M.A.**

**Report**

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## **Abstract**

### **Stories as Capacious Objects: Narratives of Belonging in LGBT Community in Chennai, India**

by

Aniruddhan Vasudevan, M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

Supervisor: Kamran Ali

This report grows out of my observations and fieldwork notes made in the summer of 2014 in Chennai, India. It argues that when faced with conflicting pulls, varied levels of visibility and state recognition, and multiple axes of privileges, disenfranchisement and suffering, some members of the LGBT community in Chennai emphasized the importance of an additional set of implicit criteria for what constitutes solidarity: showing up; doing the work; making a timely gesture of support or help; being present in a moment of crisis; having shared experiences of fun, outrage, suffering, etc. They used narratives to emphasize friendships and longevity of associations across sexual orientation, gender identity, class, caste, etc., as a way to ameliorate the anxieties created by the questioning of solidarities. My claim is not that such a focus on relationships across social divides directly challenges or carries the potential to challenge larger social orders of gender, class, or caste in a systematic way. My desire, instead, is to focus on the very urge felt by actors involved to ameliorate through narratives the questioning of the legitimacy of the idea of a community. My aim has been to understand what attitudes to relationships and solidarities and what kinds of connections, affect, and slantedness towards one another these exercises reveal.

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## Introduction

Written as an MA Report and aimed towards the completion of a Master's degree in Anthropology, this paper grows out of my observations and "fieldwork" notes made in the summer of 2014 in Chennai, India. I place *fieldwork* within quotes only to highlight the messiness of the term for me, since my work is with the LGBT community of Chennai, and my association with, and my sense of belonging in, that community is much longer than my time as a graduate student here at the University of Texas at Austin (UT). I see myself as a member of this community, and I am very much held in place in the world by the sense of stability and community I derive from this belonging as well as from the years of association and shared experiences and action.

In May 2014, after completing my first year of graduate school work at UT, I returned to Chennai, my home, to spend a few months working and researching with LGBT groups. Home and community had, by then, become "happy objects," as Sara Ahmed uses the term. Speaking of happiness as not just a "feeling state" but as an affect that turns us towards specific objects, Ahmed suggests that because of our turning towards them, "objects become happy" and that "then such objects are passed around, accumulating positive affective value as social goods" (Ahmed 2010, 21). Within the short time away from both, and with my work and thought (academic and otherwise) constantly converging on them from afar, both my home and my LGBT community were the key happy objects that had accumulated immense "positive affective value," they were what my "good feelings were directed towards," and they were the main affective spaces that provided "a shared horizon of experience" for me (Ahmed, *The Promise of*

Happiness 2010, 21). By saying “both my *home* and my LGBT *community*,” I seem to suggest that they are two separate spaces/ objects. That is not true. It is often within my sense of belonging in that community, with all its messiness (a key term in this essay), that I find my sense of home. Even my feeling at home in the familial space is linked to that space’s acceptance of my non-heterosexual desires and practices. For, as Ahmed says, “it is hard to separate images of good life from the historic privileging of heterosexual conduct...” (Ahmed 2010, 90). This paper is an exercise in ethnographic writing, wherein I have tried to zoom in on to some moments that occurred during my trip back home to Chennai in summer 2014.

Much had also happened in India, vis-à-vis LGBT politics and lives in 2013-2014, all of which had an influence on *the angle of my arrival* (Ahmed, 2010, 41). Two key moments, in particular, stood out: In December 2013, the Supreme Court of India had issued its judgment in the case involving Section 377 of Indian Penal Code (henceforth IPC), upholding the constitutionality of this legal provision and, effectively, recriminalizing adult, consensual, same sex acts. This was a reversal of fortunes from July 2009, when the Delhi High Court had ruled that Section 377 was unconstitutional in its violation of the rights of those adults who engaged in consensual, same-sex sexual acts in private. Recognizing that the law, despite its reference to acts and not persons, was used to criminalize homosexuals and the LGBT community, the Naz judgment of July



2009 had, effectively, decriminalized homosexuality.<sup>1</sup> In April 2014, four months after the re-criminalization of homosexuality, the Supreme Court of India ruled on a different case, the

National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) Vs. the Union of India, advancing a number of rights to transgender persons. The different attitudes that the state revealed, through these two judgments, towards lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons on the one hand, and towards transgendered persons on the other, had set off some interesting conversations, a lot of which I followed through skype and telephone conversations and my readings online. The time of my arrival in Chennai in summer 2014 coincided with the preparations for the annual Chennai Rainbow Pride month in June. I had been part of these preparations and organizing since summer of 2009 when Chennai had its first LGBT Pride month and Pride Parade, and I was now excited to be back at a time when there would be opportunities to meet and work with a lot of people.

Over 8 -10 weeks in summer 2014 (June – August), I interacted with about fifty people who identified as members of the LGBT community or as allies and supporters. I conducted interviews and involved myself, as a member of the community, in the work towards Chennai Rainbow Pride month activities (with Chennai Rainbow Coalition). I also worked closely with Nirangal, a collective of activists working towards gender and sexuality rights, assisting them with fundraising and conducting trainings and workshops.

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<sup>1</sup> See Alok Gupta's "Section 377 and the Dignity of Indian Homosexuals" (Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 41, No. 46 (Nov. 18-24, 2006), pp. 4815-4823) for an excellent discussion of how the slippage from "acts" to "persons" happens in the reading of Section 377.

This essay is based largely on material gathered during participant-observation work. I have used pseudonyms for all those who wanted it so.

Though one of my interests, before my arrival, had been to see what effects the Supreme Court's verdict on 377 had on families, processes of "coming out," and conversations and work around anti-discrimination statutes, I found my attention drawn towards something else.

Within a small but vibrant group within the wider LGBT community in Chennai, I observed that the two legal judgments from the highest court in Indian judiciary were exerting some pressures and pulls on the sense of one large LGBT community that had been forged over time. I do not argue that the two verdicts from the Supreme Court of India, and the conversations that followed soon after, have made solidarities among LGBT identities vexed. They have only highlighted the already vexed and messy nature of these solidarities as something that cannot anymore be ignored merely by foregrounding sexuality as a site for political struggle, where other differences and inequalities can be bracketed off for the time being. It is important to remember, however that, being thrown together into a circle of belonging under the rubric of "LGBT" itself is a consequence of a global discourse of sexuality rights politics which, upon a closer look, would reveal complex and important erasures and other violences.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, in the US, significant critiques draw attention to how the articulation of "LGBT community" erases the differences in priorities and issues. The Against Equality collective makes a pointed critique of the Marriage Equality movement for foregrounding same-sex marriage as the central project for the LGBT community, taking focus and resources away from questions of healthcare, housing, transphobia, gentrification, the prison-industrial complex, homelessness, etc. See, *Against Equality: Queer Revolution, Not Mere Inclusion*, edited by Ryan Conrad and Yasmin Nair, Published by AK Press, 2014.

In Chennai, like in many other parts of India, many trajectories and conditions intersect. Some of these are: the localized form of this global discourse of LGBT; local forms of gender and sexual identities such as kothi and aravani; politics of funding for HIV/AIDS and human rights work; specific histories of class, caste, patriarchy; etc. In addition to these, there have also been important critiques of the elitism of the movement's focus on the litigation against Section 377 as an upper class, gay male-centric project that has co-opted subaltern narratives of suffering, discrimination, and violence faced by kothis, aravanis, and others (Semmalar 2014). Moreover, support from lesbian and bisexual women and transmen's groups to the work against Section 377 have also been offered alongside critiques that the LGBT movement's heavy reliance on both the public health-HIV/AIDS discourse (based on highlighting the human rights violations faced by Men who have Sex with Men, and transgender women, as people particularly vulnerable to HIV infection) and the 377 legal discrimination discourse is centered largely on the lives and experiences of male-born queer people. Important critiques have also drawn attention to the fact that while the key movers in the LGBT movement are not only from upper class but are also upper caste, caste itself never becomes a subject of conversation or debate (Semmalar 2014).

As a member of this community and because of my engagement as an activist until 2013, I have been aware of these multiple narratives and critiques, and I have also actively taken part in many of these conversations. In addition to these, and due to what I had perceived (for some years now) as the tenuousness of the sense of one large LGBT community, I did not expect the Supreme Court judgments to have any new and profound

impact on communal ties except, perhaps, to lay bare that very tenuousness. I expected some conversations to happen with greater frequency and intensity: conversations about why the state was inclined towards recognizing transgender persons as people to be supported with rights and protected from discrimination, while it was not ready to decriminalize homosexuality. I also expected that some of these conversations would openly address questions of class, caste, privilege as key factors of difference among people within LGBT groups, and how the different life trajectories experienced by transgender individuals led to significantly different (from most LGB-identified individuals) relationships to family, home, education, and work, which exposed them to heightened forms of discrimination and violence.

However, while I saw that the Supreme Court verdicts did amplify this messiness of connections and belonging (by simply not recognizing these connections and belonging), there was also something else happening within a relatively small group of LGBT people working together under the banner of Chennai Rainbow Coalition. I noticed some subtle ways people had of recognizing that the now unavoidable focus on differences and divergences might also fray the threads of connections and friendships forged over time and across differences of social class and gender and sexual identities. I observed that stories and anecdotes of shared work, suffering, or fun emerged to mitigate the damage that focus on difference could do to friendships across those very differences.

This essay, then, is partly about those narratives that I saw as doing the mitigating work of affirming friendships and connections forged over time and despite differences of social class, gender, and sexual identities, which were important to recognize, now

more than before. As an upper caste (Tamil Brahmin), middle class, English-speaking, cis-gendered gay male myself, I am not arguing that these narrative moments made crucial differences in privileges and positions irrelevant. I am not arguing that through these narratives, people celebrated friendships and turned a blind eye to the social inequalities among themselves. On the contrary, I see these moments as precisely emerging from the emotional labor of recognizing these differences and inequalities, but adding to that the additional affective work of simultaneously affirming connections and friendships. These narratives were acts of clearing little spaces where the work of dealing with the messy nature of solidarities within people of such diverse social backgrounds – the messiness that has now been highlighted by the instruments of governmentality, the judgments from the Supreme Court -- could be done without drawing clear battle lines.

### **How to historicize desires and identities?**

Before I proceed to the ethnography, it is important for me to own up to an important limitation in my activist approach to queer social science scholarship. As an activist and a social scientist in the making who has prioritized the exigencies of the ongoing present faced by a group of despised minorities in India, I am very much enmeshed in what Indrani Chatterjee has called “the condition of professional social sciences at present [whose] underside is that the political engagements of the present override the imagination and investigation of the past” (Chatterjee 2012, 953). In this essay, I work with the identities people have assigned for themselves, the desires and orientations they attribute to those identities, and their negotiation of social, political, and

governmental spaces as bearers of those identities. However, if LGBT as an assemblage of identities and concerns has to be historicized as part of a global circulation of ideas and social formations of late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21st centuries, so should the very dimorphic understanding of gender and sexuality that underpins such a formation. Knowing the history of the Liberal, colonial, capitalist epistemologies that undergird the extraction of the very category of sexuality in contemporary South Asia is important for the larger exercise for queer Indians, among others, to know ourselves as people with a past that doesn't tie in quite neatly with what we know ourselves to be today (Chatterjee 2015). What is the line of history that connects, say, a gay-identified Hindu man in India today with the multitude of references to non-normative sexual and gender practices in ancient and medieval Hindu texts (Kidwai and Vanita 2001)? What arcs of desire link the words in Urdu Rekhti poetry of 18<sup>th</sup> century Lucknow with the words of desire in queer women's texts today (Vanita 2011)? How do we understand the relationship between aravanis, hijras, and kothis of today and precolonial structures of "monastic governmentality," spiritual lineages, ritual initiations when "nobody can quite explain the century-long process of their arrival" to their places of marginality in contemporary India (Chatterjee 2012, 952)? These are important questions to ask and answers to seek to mitigate the blindspots within "subcontinental feminist, queer, and postcolonial scholarship in global 'gender and sexuality' studies" (Chatterjee 2012, 953). While it is not within the scope of this study, I would like to proceed from the scholarly admission that my own engagement is not free from the historical amnesia that Chatterjee has pointed out. I only bring to my work the awareness of that lacuna.

# I

## Community in Question

One of the first things I did once I landed in Chennai in May 2014 after my first year of graduate school in Austin was to go to an LGBT Pride planning meeting at Sahodaran, a very well-known male sexual health project working in central and north Chennai. It was the third week of May, and the members of Chennai Rainbow Coalition were holding their third Pride planning meeting one hot and sultry afternoon at Sahodaran's office in Aminjikarai.

I arrived early, because I wanted to catch up with friends before the meeting started. I was seeing them all after close to a year, and I was both excited and apprehensive. I had already succumbed, even in my very first year of graduate school in the US, to a narcissistic guilt about having moved away from home and my community, of having chosen to do privileged academic work - the kind of guilt that can beat the life out of positionality and make everything about oneself. So I was anxious about how my friends and colleagues in the LGBT circles would perceive me. I was also battling my anthropological super ego, which was now suddenly conscious of how much I should participate, how much of an observer I should be, how much I should speak, etc. I wanted to get all that awkwardness out of the way (an ambitious desire for sure) before the discussion started, which promised to be somewhat heated.

My friend Siva, a fine activist and one of the founders of the Nirangal collective, had sounded me out on a specific topic that would come up for discussion that day. Some

aravani<sup>3</sup> activists had held a separate meeting and sort of decided not to be part of the Pride month activities this year. The reason for this was that the Supreme Court's judgment on *National Legal Services Authority Vs. the Union of India*, which had come out just a month earlier, had advanced a number of rights for transgender persons, just three months after the December 2013 verdict in the case against Sec 377 of Indian Penal Code, in which the apex court effectively recriminalized homosexuality. Apparently, these aravanis had expressed that continuing to be seen working closely with LGB groups might jeopardize their newly gained rights. News of this meeting and the stance taken by these aravani activists had created quite a bit of consternation within the Chennai Rainbow Coalition, a loosely structured coalition of LGBT groups, HIV/AIDS organizations, other human rights groups, and individuals without any specific organizational affiliations.

I felt blinded and disoriented when I entered Sahodaran's dark and curtained work space from the harsh white light of the summer afternoon. Everything and everyone appeared in silhouettes, the animated bodies of the kothis<sup>4</sup> and aravanis working or

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<sup>3</sup> Aravanis are a third gender/ transgender community of the Tamil region. Though often translated and understood as male-to-female transgender or transsexual women in English, not all aravanis share the teleological narrative of being born male, recognizing their feminine gender 'trapped' in a male body, and transformation completed by self-identification and surgical transformation. Though such narratives have emerged in the media and in researches with approach aravanis with a Western lens of the 'transgender,' and though aravanis themselves often identify as transgender since the term came into vogue with HIV/AIDS intervention discourse in the 1990s, the translation is not adequate and accrues many caveats and asterisks to it, which are difficult to unpack without a discussion of the history of gender identity and performance in the subcontinent, which is beyond the scope of this essay.

<sup>4</sup> Kothi – a term that now refers to those who are born biologically male but claim a feminized gender identity and are also receptive partners in male-to-male sex. The label is used predominantly by people from lower economic and working class backgrounds who initially lived within or in the fringes of the traditional aravani jamaats, but opted to live mostly in male attires and to not undergo castration procedures. While some view the kothi identity as a transition phase on the path towards becoming an



hanging out at Sahodaran, and the furniture that had been moved aside to the edges of the room to make space for the meeting. But I heard the voices very clearly, one voice in particular. Vijaya, who identified as a kothi, and was very popular in the community for her wit and her performative humor. She was also an excellent manager of projects and organizer of events and was held in awe by a lot of younger kothis, most of whom called her “auntie.” She was ordering them around now and was asking some of them to go down to the tea shop and get some tea and snacks, when I entered the space. She was excited to see me, and after spending sometime chastising me for not staying in touch enough, she sat me down and asked me if I had found a lover in the US: “A big white man with a big white cock. Or a black man. Whatever pleases you,” she said, and slipping into a quick reminiscence of her trip to the US some years ago, she remarked on the surprise she had felt at how big some men were in the US. One of the kothis, who was supposed to go down to the tea shop but had stopped to listen to our banter, said, “Auntie, you mean they were big bodied or they had big dicks. Big men don’t always have big dicks, you know.” Vijaya chose not to respond to that and chased them away to go get tea.

People trickled in slowly, many of them drenched in sweat, tshirts and blouses blotched with sweat marks. “Don’t even think about hugging me,” one of them warned, as he walked in, “I am burning all over,” and walked straight towards the restroom, from

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aravani, many kothi activists see it as a complete identity in its own right. The term also has a complex history, with competing narratives some of which see it as a new category that has materialized in response to the pressures of AIDS cosmopolitanism (See Cohen 2005), while others have argued a history that is coterminous with those of aravani and hijra identities (see Gayatri Reddy’s *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*, University of Chicago Press, 2005).

where he emerged several minutes later, changed and scented. It soon became a motley crowd of many aravanis and kothis, some gay and bisexual men, a few lesbian women, and some others who were new to me. It was a mixed crowd in many senses of the word. Some were middle and upper-middle class, English speaking persons who identified as gay, bisexual, or lesbian. Some others were allies from similar social and economic backgrounds. Most of the kothis and aravanis present worked in HIV/AIDS intervention projects, some occupying higher posts such as project manager or program officer, and others working in the lower rungs of that hierarchy as counsellors or outreach workers. Many of them were also sex workers.

People settled on the floor and on the small divan that faced the TV, on which was playing a DVD from a past cultural event where the Sahodaran team had participated. The younger kothis who were watching it had muted the sound after Vijaya yelled at them twice, but they continued to point at the screen and laugh at someone getting a move wrong. Suma, an older kothi, grabbed the remote from one of them and turned the DVD off, and the three younger kothis didn't protest. Instead, they decided to get out before the meeting started.

When the meeting did start, one of the first things that came up for discussion was this news of possible dissociation by some aravani activists from the coalition's activities. Vijaya had heard directly from one of these activists on the phone, so she explained what their position was: that the possibility for a range of rights opened up by the NALSA judgment could be jeopardized by the aravani community's involvement in larger LGBT activities, since the Supreme Court had recently upheld the constitutionality of Sec 377 of

Indian Penal Code, effectively recriminalizing homosexuality. There were lots of noises of disapproval and charges of politicking, and the room was charged with the hiss of collective disapproval. I looked to the aravanis and kothis in the room to see what opinions their faces and words registered, and it appeared that they were all against such cautious dissociation from the larger ‘community.’ Some of the kothis, in particular, were vehement in their criticism of those aravani leaders who had suggested that transgender persons should support LGB activities “from the outside.” Suma spoke loudly, and her voice pierced the cacophony in the room: “Oh these ‘senior’ aravanis have nothing else to do. They are constantly trying to do politics and create divisions and problems. We should just ignore them and carry on with what we do.” Sankari, an aravani activist, tried to respond to this, but Suma repeated herself in an even louder voice directed at a specific corner of the room where, she thought, people had not heard her properly the first time.

After Vijaya shushed Suma down, Sankari smiled and spoke calmly, “This is more than politicking or creating trouble between groups. Those things are normally there everywhere. These aravani activists are taking this particular position at this specific time for some reasons. We should be clear about that whether we agree with them or not. They have problems not only with associating with the 377 campaign and lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, they also have problems with many other people included by the NALSA judgment as transgenders. We should also understand that.” Suma raised her voice again and said, “Yes! For them, only those who have cut it off matter!” making the unmistakable gesture with her hands, of cutting away male genitalia. “Yes. But not only that,” said Sankari, “They also have problems with Thirunambigal

being included in the law,” referring to the Supreme Court’s NALSA judgment’s inclusion of transgender men (those who were assigned gender female at birth but identified as men) within its purview. This caused some giggles and murmurs among small groups of people who had already been having their little chatter and jokes, constantly provoking angry glares and warnings of “Hey! Stop talking!” from Vijaya. She leaned over to me and said, “Don’t we have to behave ourselves when we host a meeting here, Ani? These monkeys don’t care what anyone thinks. No discipline.”

She then asked me how my life was in Austin and what the weather was like, and by the time I finished talking to her, Subash was in the middle of his point. A cis-gendered male who was vocal about his refusal to be pinned down to any sexual identity, Subash’s sexual orientation was a constant topic of speculation and gossip, and because he took an active part in meetings and events and spoke and arbitrated a lot, some of the kothis had given him the nickname “the senior aravani,” implying that they thought he lorded it over everyone, much like the seniors with their jamaats<sup>5</sup>. “My second point is,” Subash was saying, and I was distracted again by Siva’s whispered comment in my ears, “Ani! For the first time in his life, Subash has actually come to his second point!” making me giggle along with a few others near me who had heard Siva’s comment. Subash had this trademark way of speaking in the meetings where he would begin by saying, “There are two points I wish to make. The first point is...,” and he never came to his second

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<sup>5</sup> The name aravanis use to refer to the system of kinship and the homes and relationships into which they are ritually initiated once they formally enter the community. Indrani Chatterjee has suggested that this is part of “the leftover monastic governmental pattern of the past, complete with guru and ritual initiations. But they subsist on the margins of urban Muslim and Hindu lineages as third-gender beings. They are the hijras and kothis. They live in an ethnographic present. But nobody can quite explain the century-long process of their arrival at the marginal present” (Chatterjee 2012, 952).

point, that is until that day. His “two points” had become a sort of inside joke that drew mischievous glances and suppressed giggles at various meetings.

Vijaya had to shush as all this time, and Subash continued, but not before directing a disappointed look at me. “...as I was saying, my second point is that we should not fall for what the government or the court is trying to do. To separate us, to create divisions. We have not accomplished anything alone. We have all worked together in all situations. When that thing happened last year, that crisis, and Siva knows what I am talking about, and Ani might remember too,” and he gestured towards Siva and me, though neither of us had a clear idea what crisis Subash was referring to. But we nodded anyway, because we also knew that this too was a narrative habit of his – making vague references to past moments and enlisting other people’s agreement with that narrative. So we nodded him on, and he gave examples of some instances where people had worked together despite differences in terms of sexual orientation gender identity, class, caste, etc. He ended by saying “So these dominant structures are trying to split us. We should also keep that in mind.” With his involvement in different social movements and his years of participation in activist theatre work, Subash had acquired a certain way of talking about politics, which gave him a level of Tamil political discourse which set him apart from most others in lgbt meetings. But everyone agreed with his comment about state structures using differential treatment under law to create divisions within the ‘community.’

Someone suddenly asked, “Did anyone inform Selvam about the meeting today?” thinking of our friend and transman who was the only transman many of us knew in the

Chennai area until a few years ago, when a few others who identified as transmen started attending the meetings. But these others were from upper class, English-speaking backgrounds. So for most kothis and aravanis, most of whom were from lower economic and working-class backgrounds, Selvam was still the representative Thirunambi, the transman. Siva replied, “Yes, I did. He couldn’t make it today. He is in Kalpakkam.”

It was decided at the meeting that someone should speak to “those” aravani activists about what the consensus here was: that we cannot allow the outcomes of the 377 and NALSA judgments to divide the ‘community’ and to reconsider our solidarity with one another. Vijaya was nominated as the person who should speak to them about this, effect a change of mind, and enlist their support.

### **Solidarity at the crossroads:**

The views and positions that emerged at this meeting in May 2014 in Chennai, and the conversations, discussions, and events that played out subsequently during the rest of my stay there that summer lie at the crisscrossing of several histories, discourses, and trajectories of solidarities. Some of them are:

History of the 377 litigation: The litigation aimed at reading down Section 377 of IPC, the anti-sodomy law in India, began in the year 2001 in the Delhi High Court when Naz Foundation India, an NGO working on HIV/AIDS filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) challenging the law. The case had an interesting trajectory, where it was once thrown out by the court on grounds that an NGO did not have the *locus standi* to file a PIL (2006),

which was then countered by the Supreme Court and the case reinstated. Following hearings in 2008, the Delhi High Court issued its judgment in July 2009, arguing that Section 377 violated constitutional rights of persons, and decriminalizing consensual same-sex acts between adults (Alternative Law Forum 2009). There have been important critiques of the way this legal battle got elevated into the status of ‘the’ LGBT movement in India, and of the elitism and gay male-centric interests of this movement (Semmlar 2014, 288-289).

History of Aravani Activism in Tamil Nadu: While aravanis, hijras, and other third gender and male-to-female transgender communities have a long history of presence in the sub-continent, the specific struggle of seeking legitimacy and citizenship rights from the state began a little over a decade ago in the early 2000s. Significant progress was made in the state of Tamil Nadu (Chennai, my home and work site, is the capital of this state) beginning 2004, when a group of aravanis moved the Madras High Court to compel the state government to issue identity cards, ration cards, and voter’s identity cards. This resulted a lot of visibility and further engagements with the state, having its key moment in the setting up of the Aravani Welfare Board in 2008 and the offering of free Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS) since 2009 (Govindan and Vasudevan 2011). All of this created the image of Tamil Nadu as a model state for transgender welfare.

Changes in the idea of the community: Over the last decade or so, there has been a gradual weakening of the traditional jamaat and guru-chela kinship system of aravanis, both as a result of the questioning, by younger aravanis, of the excesses of personal power and control exercised by several aravanis of the guru status, and also because the

state's welfare processes took less cognizance of these traditional relationships and recognized aravanis instead as individual, habitable subject-citizens (Govindan and Vasudevan 2011).

Who is the real aravani? Active engagements with bodies of governance has also set off a debate, which is ongoing now, within and among aravanis and kothis about who should be the legitimate subject of transgender rights and welfare, where some of the criteria discussed and debated are post-operative status (should those who have not opted for surgical castration qualify to be recognized as transgenders officially?), complete separation from natal family, no marital family where they functioned as husbands or fathers, permanent adoption of the feminine attire, etc.

Voices of female-born queer persons: Lesbian and bisexual women and transmen have also been pointing out, consistently, to the pervasive misogyny and the marginalization faced by female-born queer persons in the larger society as well as within the LGBT movement (Mohan 2013, 34-35). They have drawn attention to fact that the centrality of HIV/AIDS intervention discourse and its framing of transgender women and Men who have Sex with Men (MSM) as vulnerable groups, and the marshaling of this health discourse to foreground the human rights of these “vulnerable populations” have resulted in the marginalization of lesbian and bisexual women and transmen. Their critique has extended to the priorities of the 377 litigation, which traffics in some of these discourses, albeit as a matter of strategy. In the case of aravani rights, the underside to the focus on hypervisible transwomen's bodies by both state and non-state actors has been the invisibility of transmen.



Questioning the logic of 'LGBT': Activists have pointed to the instability of the collective category of an 'LGBT community' itself; they have critiqued it as an erasure of key differences not only in terms of sexual orientations, gender identities and the specificities of struggles premised on those identities, but also as an erasure of differences of privilege and hierarchies in terms of class, caste, education, social and cultural capital, etc. Gee Imaan Semmalar's critique is a particularly strong one:

The gradation of power in the urban, televised LGBT "family" shows a typical heteronormative, nuclear family pattern with cisgender gay men with class/ caste power as heads of the "family;" second in line are lesbians with caste and class power, followed by the transgender stepchildren, who are so marginalized by the "family" they don't figure in any political agenda or programs except as colorful peacocks for a few photos in newspapers once a year during Pride marches. (Semmalar 2014, 288).

Another critique, this time at the deployment of the term 'homosexual community' came recently (2013) from the judiciary, when the Supreme Court judges who heard the case against Section 377 questioned its use, marking the recalcitrance of the traditional understanding of community as geographically localized, marked by shared caste and class identities, held together by blood and marital ties, etc. in the state's eye (Suresh Kumar Kaushal Vs. Naz Foundation India 2014, 24-25).

Different lives, different laws: In recent years, the complex and varied understandings of the impact of Section 377, the anti-sodomy law, on trans lives has also been a subject of discussion. Even while the appeals to decriminalize adult, consensual sodomy has

invoked the impact of the law on transgender women and the threat and violence they allegedly face under this law, many trans activists have questioned that claim. They have argued that transgender women are affected a lot more by certain other laws that target acts that constitute public nuisance, obscenity, solicitation for sex work, etc. (Semmalar 289 and Sunil Mohan 37-41).

Varied expectations placed on aravanis: Different allegiances and solidarities have been expected from aravanis in Tamil Nadu over the last decade or so, which have been animated within the conflicting priorities of multiple framings:

(1) The sense of a collectively disenfranchised LGBT community, allegiances to that sense of community, and the relationships it opens up, all of which have been built over time and in an ad hoc way. I call it ad hoc, because subscribing to the idea of an LGBT community, which is premised on the idea of collective disenfranchisement and discrimination on grounds of sexuality and gender identity, has not been a smooth and unreflexive process. At various times over the last decade, people from various locations in the so-called rainbow LGBT spectrum have raised questions about why the different identities and issues should be clubbed together as concern of an “LGBT community.” At all those times, many others, including me, saw ‘LGBT’ as an obvious site of progressive, united, intersectional politics. Any questioning of that connectedness was, and is, for many, a sign of the failure to see something that is self-evident;

(2) The state’s interest (initially, in Tamil Nadu, through executive decrees) in extracting aravanis as a separate category of people needing and deserving its benevolence (a doublespeak whereby state process make aravanis appear both as citizens and subjects). It

is difficult to account for why the state, in India, has been eager over the past decade to “fold” aravanis back into life, to use Jasbir Puar’s compelling idea. How do we understand the way in which politicians and the state have positioned themselves as entities interested in the *welfare* of transgendered/ third gendered people?<sup>6</sup> Jasbir Puar develops the notion of being “folded (back) into life” in talking about, in the US context, the “biopolitical investment in fostering life from the vantage point of homosexual bodies that have been historically cathected to death, specifically queer bodies afflicted with or threatened by the HIV pandemic” (Puar 2007, 32). She seeks to move beyond the centrality of Foucault’s notion of biopower by drawing from Achille Mbembe’s idea of “necropolitics” which foregrounds the fact that thinking of biopower exclusively in terms of its incitement to life and the grid of mechanisms that seek to establish control and perpetuation of life is not an entirely useful theoretical model any longer. “The

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<sup>6</sup> Some years ago, Padma Govindan and I, speculated that the Tamil Nadu State Government’s moves to set up an Aravani Welfare Board under the State Social Welfare Board and institute a number of welfare schemes posed the dangers of turning aravanis into welfare subjects as opposed to rights-seeking citizens (Govindan and Vasudevan 2011 – see bibliography). While those dangers will always remain in the vicinity of any minority community’s engagement with the state as a locus of rights and legitimacy, it is also important to recognize the agential and creative ways in which the aravani community has engaged with the forces of governmentality. It is possible to see the aravani community as a “political society” in the sense Partha Chatterjee has used it: to describe those communities who lack the legal standing to be citizens but mobilize themselves in groups that acquire the moral character of a community (See “Populations and Political Society” in *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*, Columbia University Press, 2004, pp. 27-51). This highlights the difficulty in talking about an LGBT community, because it is a messy space that attempts to hold together both people from civil society and those who remain outside of it, to continue to draw from Partha Chatterjee’s analysis. It consists of people with different priorities vis-à-vis their wish list from the state: those whose concern is to become legible to the state as transgender/ third gender people; those who want their sexual activities, and hence their sexual selves, to not be considered criminal by the state; those for whom their gender identity and sexual orientation have had a direct bearing on their social status and every day material wellbeing – most aravanis and kothis are poor, even if they were originally from well-to-do families. They have moved out of their families, or been disowned, and hence find themselves severed from the social status of their families of birth.

biopolitical will to live plows on,” but it does so only “in the face of daily necropolitical violence, suffering, and death” (Puar 2007, 33). That is, Puar’s analysis, by drawing our attention to the processes through which some bodies are folded back into life, also draws to our vision those bodies that will have to die, that will have to be attached to death in new forms.<sup>7</sup> By doing a contextualized borrowing of this analysis in order to illuminate the context of aravani activism and state response Tamil Nadu, I suggest that it is possible to read the Tamil Nadu State Government’s attempts to address the rights issues of aravanis through the mechanisms and language of “welfare” and “rehabilitation” as measures to fold aravanis into life.

(3) A later, modified interest by which the state (judiciary, in this case) does not only enshrine the category ‘transgender’ with rights that apply nation-wide, but it also opens up ‘transgender’ to a different set of criteria of identification, which conflicts with the views of many aravani activists: the judgments’ consideration of sex reassignment surgical status as less relevant, foregrounding self-identification as a major criterion, and considering transwomen and transmen as equal claimants to rights (Sheikh 2014, 1).

In addition to the aforesaid trajectories of movement, conversation, and critique, the conversations and anxieties that have emerged after the two important Supreme Court

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<sup>7</sup> Puar’s analysis in the context of the queering of the terrorist’s body grows out of her critique that “some homosexual subjects are complicit with heterosexual nationalist formations rather than inherently or automatically excluded from or opposed to them” (Puar 2007, 4). The folding back into life of some homosexual subjects is conditional upon their practice of “what Rey Chow terms ‘coercive mimeticism – a process (identitarian, existential, cultural, or textual) in which those who are marginal to mainstream Western culture are expected to resemble and replicate the very banal preconceptions that have been appended to them, a process in which they are expected to objectify themselves in accordance with the already seen and thus to authenticate the familiar imaginings” (as quoted in Puar 2007, 92).

verdicts (one recriminalizing homosexuality and the other advancing a set of rights to transgender persons) throw into relief both the endurance and limits of solidarities that queer struggles in the region have so far relied on.

## II

### Capacious Stories

When we were gathered for another meeting on a different day, I found myself at the fringes of various conversations going on in the space before the meeting began. Voices were travelling in lines and curves, addressing one another directly now, and then suddenly moving sideways like crabs and referencing other bodies present in the space by name, but without necessarily drawing them into the conversation itself. Jokes were being made dime a dozen – self-targeted ones interspersed among jokes made at the expense of others, no discrimination made between those present and those who weren't. "Tell her if you want to. I am not scared," was someone's response, when someone else claiming higher moral scruples pointed out that the object of her joke, absent in the space then, might take offense to it if she heard about it. Commands, taunts, requests, jokes, and come-backs overlapped, interrupted, deflected, crisscrossed, and cut across the space, linking people, drawing them in, pushing some away only to draw them back in again. They also reached farther away from the space, mentioning others who belonged but weren't present, the very mention of their names conjuring a part of them there, and the narratives that followed doing the job of conjuring a little more of them, making holographic images, as it were, of people who were expected to be there but weren't.

Some of the exchanges travelled in wide projectile arcs, with references lost on many, flying over many of the bodies, linking only two or three people in exclusive bonds, but only until someone from the outside chose to interrupt that flow. Some other

voices and words ricocheted within smaller confines, among bodies huddled together on the floor, voices lowered to confide secrets or whisper gossips. There were other voices and words that opened out like welcoming arms, landing on everyone with a quick but definite acknowledgment of presence, gesturing to draw everyone closer – the voices of the hosts of the meeting, coming towards each with a paper plate already sucking oil from the savoury vegetable puff pastry placed on it. Sounds of soda fizz, as large bottles of Fanta and Sprite were twisted open, their little plastic seals crackling, snapping, and giving in, punctuated the sounds that were chaotic but also organized in some complex, order-defying way.

While chewing on the first mouthful of the hot, oily, layered, and delicious vegetable puff, I found myself mentioned by name, my attention sought, tugged at, and pulled by a story. Vijaya was speaking:

Kumar, do you remember that conference in Delhi we went to? Must be ten years ago. That 377 meeting where I didn't understand a word anyone said? Aiiyo! Ani was there too. Ani, you translated in Tamil for a while, no? And then we lost interest. Too much was going on... Kumar, remember that man who was with the catering crew? Ani, I don't know if you remember. This boy was *seesa panthi*! I was looking at him, but he was looking at Kumar. Who did him finally, Kumar? You or me? I don't remember. I sucked so many dicks on that trip. (Field notes, May 2014)

All through Vijaya's recollection of travel and titillation, Kumar appeared very tentative. He opened his mouth a few times to sneak a word in, but couldn't. I understood his

confusion. He hadn't been at that meeting in Delhi. Vijaya and I had been there, and her recollection of my translating from English and Hindi to Tamil was accurate. But we had not really known Kumar then. He looked a little confused, and it appeared like he wanted to correct Vijaya, but he didn't. He looked at me, perhaps hoping I would set the story right, and I was about to, but I stopped myself. I suspected that there was more at stake in such sharing of anecdotes than the truthful recounting of past incidents, but I could not tease out what it was. So I nodded in the affirmative, and smiled, and someone asked if I was a lawyer, and I said I wasn't.

It was not until I heard, over the course of the subsequent weeks, many such stories recollected and shared, that I got an inkling of what these narratives were doing, and what people were doing with these narratives. In fact, when I heard a different version of the above story on another occasion, I realized that my hearing it was not accidental: the story was coming up partly to reference me, to highlight my belonging in this community and the (alleged) longevity of my association with some of these people. This time, it was being narrated for the benefit of some younger and newer members who didn't know me, and Vijaya used this anecdote to weave me into a narrative of belonging and shared work. This time, the anecdote did not highlight the sexual adventures we did or did not engage in; instead, it was focused on the fact that there had been a large national consultation on the status of the case against Section 377, and that we had travelled to Delhi for that "all those years ago." With her friendly arm touching my hand, and occasionally moving to touch me on the small of my back in affection, Vijaya was using this story to present me to the younger kothis, to impress upon them the long period



of our association, and our shared work reaching beyond Chennai and Tamil Nadu to Delhi, the seat of the nation. In addition to that, the story also served to soften the anxiety of alienation I felt in introducing myself now also as an anthropologist in the making, visiting from America. The narrative, I realized, functioned as a capacious object that could, like the size-adjustable suitcases that have extra zippers to open and hold more things, shape- and size-shift and hold different projects. They could even hold different bodies (Kumar was not a big part of the story this time), cast their words as a net over a new and different “we” each time, foregrounding specific formations of solidarity, community, and friendship.

Some of the anecdotes I heard repeated during my stay and work in Chennai last summer were about experiences of crisis intervention: visits to police stations; fearful moments of facing the bigotry and hatred of parents who were unkind to their LGBT children, the bigotry of police officers, government officials, and others; the lack of infrastructure to do crisis response work; the sheer exhaustion that such work produces; and some moments of hilarity embedded within those experiences of uncertainty and stress. The narratives that were repeated at various times encompassed incidents of police violence on aravanis and kothis; cases of threat and extortion where gay and bisexual men were the victims; situations involving lesbian couples in distress and fleeing forced marriages and family violence; and occasions of intra-community crisis, where ‘false’ allegations of abduction and castration had been made by one younger aravani on some other aravanis. Each narrative covered a range of emotional textures: some of the stories began as a joke, while others were to highlight how much more difficult a situation in the

past was in comparison to a situation at hand. Typically, these narratives began with, “Oh, this is nothing. You can handle it. Some years ago...” or some variation on it.

There was also a plenty of recounting of experiences from previous meetings and discussions. With years and dates blurring into a haze of a shared patch of unspecific time, people’s passionate interventions or unexpected change in positions in other meetings and conversations were recalled and fondly remembered; or were brought to the fore to suggest that the person has had a complex trajectory so we should judge him or her less harshly, or embrace him or her more cautiously, or just understand the messiness of working with him or her.

Most of the narratives had a common template. They began with “Do you remember the time we ....?” or some version of such appeal to recollection and participation in the narrative act. The “we” thus appealed to or drawn into the narrative were different each time, depending on who was present and, more importantly, on who was absent. Those who were considered an important part of the emotional texture of the moment of coming together but could not be physically present for some reason or another were brought into existence, so to speak, by these narratives of memory. The “we” of these stories was a capacious space that could hold many bodies, and slightly different ones in each retelling. They were anchored in the truth of a past occurrence, but their owed their allegiance not to the truth of details but to the truth of a shared affect, a shared slantedness towards one another. The effect of these narratives was, in fact, to construct a “we” through the very narration and not to retell an incident or experience as it occurred. Truthful retelling was not the point of this exercise. Instead, the point was to

bring in different bodies into a collective sense of belonging, a “we,” and to highlight a past, to emphasize their relationship over time, and to mark a moment where they shared an experience together as “sexual minorities” as opposed to a “general public.”

### **Exclusions of other kinds:**

In one instance, this articulation of a specific idea of community happened in a more explicit way. Kavitha, a kothi, had problems with a few aravanis and kothis attending Pride planning meetings and with taking part in some of the events. The reason she gave for it was that they had, in the recent past, proven to be of questionable integrity in their work in HIV/AIDS intervention projects. In addition to that, Kavitha alleged that one of them had also inflicted physical and emotional violence on another kothi. In arguing against including them in an event, of which I was a co-organizer, Kavitha said:

Just being a kothi does not make you community. You have to behave accordingly. You cannot be a cheat, you cannot be a liar, an embezzler, you cannot treat people from your community badly, hurt them, harm them, and also want to keep saying, “I am community, I am community.” You can have a card from the Welfare Board saying you are an Aravani. But community is a different feeling. (Field notes, May 2014)

In her argument, Kavitha was suggesting explicitly that membership to the community needs more than the identity category. For her, acting in ways that cause harm or hurt to fellow members is a serious disqualification. But this situation led to more complexification of the idea of a community. When Kavitha’s and many others’ voices

against including these specific aravanis and kothis (I shall call this group Team B for the purpose of convenience) from the Coalition's events grew stronger, it caused considerable dilemma among others who were not sure of enacting such exclusion without having a serious conversation. When I and two others, who were part of organizing some of the Pride month events, met with the kothis and aravanis in question to communicate the strong opposition they were facing, they argued that they had not been given a proper opportunity to state their case about the allegations of dishonesty and violence for a long time. During a long and difficult conversation, they also argued that, in the absence of such open and equal opportunity so far to state their side of the case, they should be allowed to participate. In the subsequent planning meeting, these questions were raised for discussion with the members of the coalition. I could not be present at this meeting, since I was sick, but I was called on the phone to state my opinion. A few of us were of the opinion that everyone should be allowed to participate or that specific event could be cancelled as a gesture of being fair to all parties involved. However, a strong majority of the members were against including team B, but they were also against cancelling the event, since many of their groups had already spent much time and energy rehearsing their performances. This messy situation was resolved by taking a vote, which, predictably, resulted in the decision to exclude team B. Voting, at once a democratic and a majoritarian exercise, was used to quickly get past the messiness of the situation. This turned out to be a situation where a certain ethical notion of community was used as a reason for exclusion and for practical resolution of a complex situation, and I was very much party to it. In the conversations that happened among a small group of

three or four of us over several occasions, we reflected on the very shape-shifting idea of community that the situation had revealed. Different criteria for membership and belonging seem to get foregrounded depending on the exigencies of the situation at hand and on the pressure exerted by some predominant affect which pulls, aligns, and affects bodies to collectively face certain directions, determining the course and direction of action.

### **Dis/orientations, Cruel Attachments, and Impasses:**

Like I have highlighted in the earlier part of the essay, the people with whom I have worked in Chennai, and whose voices animate the ethnographic moments in this piece, have never had illusions about the structural differences among them – differences in terms of class, caste, cultural capital, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Therefore, the sense of solidarity they highlight through these narratives is not one that seeks to reinscribe the idea of an LGBT community as an unreflexive site of belonging for all those engaging in non-normative gender and sexual practices. On the contrary, many of the narratives I heard involved people who have always identified as allies and not as members of the LGBT community, which suggests that these stories were not foregrounding sexual and gender identity as the main or only locus of cohering. Instead, these narratives highlighted the importance of solidarities that had emerged organically over the years by virtue of having worked together, having had shared experiences. These narratives, I suggest, were a way to buy time, to postpone acting on those anxieties, and for the actors involved to orient themselves vis-à-vis the others whom they had come to

see as belonging in that space. The stories acted as orienting devices in a time of confusion and disorientation.

Sara Ahmed's discussion of disorientation as a queer affect is useful to my analysis here. Her formulation of disorientation opens up fresh ways for thinking about our slantedness towards and away from the objects around us, our reliance on them to ground and stabilize us. Arguing that rather than seeing disorientations as calls for repair and re-orientations to familiar objects and spaces, for queer and racialized bodies, "to live out a politics of disorientation might be to sustain wonder about the very forms of social gathering" (Ahmed 2006, 24). Ahmed speaks of comfort and ease as results of bodies lining up along straight lines, which in turn have been created merely by the repeated alignment of other bodies – bodies that came before, bodies that exist now – along those directions (Ahmed 2006, 157). When bodies fail, for various reasons, to line up along these straight lines, disorientation occurs. Speaking of disorientation as an affect produced when those objects and narratives that have become "socially and bodily given" fail to ground us, Sara Ahmed asks us to consider "what we do with such moments of disorientation, as well as what such moments can do" (Ahmed 2006, 158).

The members of the Chennai Rainbow Coalition I worked with used stories of past experiences as a way to orient themselves, to populate the space with objects/ people they were familiar with and considered close. Extending the connotations of "oblique" and "off line" that are associated the word "queer," Sara Ahmed asks, "... how are we orientated toward queer moments when objects slip. Do we retain our hold on these objects by bringing them back "in line"? Or do we let them go, allowing them to acquire

new shapes and directions?” (Ahmed 2006, 172). The object, in this case, is the sense of belonging in an LGBT community as a site where engagement in non-normative sexual and gender practices is considered an adequate locus of social and political solidarity. Though for the community members, at least the ones I worked with, such an idea of the sexual as a singular enough locus for a politics was already suspect; though discussions of differences and insensitivity to differences were never shied away from; ‘LGBT’ has continued to serve as a way of cohering and foregrounding a politics of the sexual minority. However, with the Supreme Court’s refusal to decriminalize homosexuality, and with its advancement of rights to transgendered persons, the crucial differences in focus and priorities have been brought to light in a way that cannot be ignored. Like I showed in the ethnographic section in the beginning of this essay, conversations about what solidarities are productive, who belongs with whom, should one support from the “inside” or “outside” were beginning to happen. All of which, I suggest, were causing an object – the sense of an LGBT community – to slip away, which in turn caused a disorientation of sorts.

If “cruel optimism” is characterized by the attachment to an object despite knowing that continued attachment to that object is unproductive (if not altogether detrimental to oneself), because the idea of giving up that attachment seems unimaginably painful, then it would not be farfetched to say that an attachment to the idea of an LGBT politics, movement, and community, despite knowing its problems and messiness, is characterized by cruel optimism of a kind. The force of that attachment is perhaps because, as Lauren Berlant suggests, “its life-organizing status can trump

interfering with the damage it provokes” (Berlant 2011, 227). For the LGBT community has both been a space of acceptance and transformation for many of us in India; the idea of an LGBT community has been the place where our acute feelings of abnormality and loneliness have been attenuated. Indeed, membership in this community has also (re)organized the lives of most of the people discussed in this paper. Therefore, in spite of knowing the erasures and elisions created by foregrounding the sense of an LGBT community, it has been difficult for all of us involved as members to relax the hold on that attachment to see if any other mode of doing politics/ being political would be more productive.<sup>8</sup> And when forces of governmentality (the judiciary in this case), which are the agencies appealed to by this very politics, have stepped in and highlighted, instead, the cruel optimistic nature of this attachment, the effect of it has been the creation of an impasse. Lauren Berlant’s discussion of *impasse* as “a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic” is a very useful one. My focus in the second half of this paper has been on the use of narratives of past experiences to mitigate the anxieties produced in the present and for actors to re-orient themselves to their spaces of belonging. Berlant thinks of an *impasse* as “a time of dithering from which someone or some situation cannot move forward.” To understand the affects that perhaps led to these exercises of storytelling as activities that could make the dithering bearable and as a form of “hypervigilance that collects material that might help clarify things,” the genre of the impasse is a useful one (Berlant 2011, 4). In this

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<sup>8</sup> Lauren Berlant would push us to think of “the desire for the political” itself as a “relation of cruel optimism”: “It may be a relation of cruel optimism, when, despite an awareness that normative political sphere appears as a shrunken, broken, or distant place of activity among elites, members of the body politic return periodically to its recommitment ceremonies and scenes” (Berlant 227).



impasse, the relation of cruel optimism in the attachment to the idea of LGBT as a locus of community and politics has been brought to light by the fact that the state, which is the body appealed to by this politics, fails to recognize this community and commonality. Moreover, in the explicit conversations about whether existing configuration of solidarities makes sense or is useful, the attachment is further weakened, and the object begins to slip away. However, the actors involved, who are from diverse backgrounds working together for a number of years mobilized around this very object, i.e. the idea of an LGBT community, perceived this as an impasse where a new attachment had yet to take its place, where it was important to “clarify things” for themselves. Stories of past, shared experiences served as doorstops to keep the doors from closing on possible solidarities and connections. They served as times of dithering in the impasse, making sense of the space. In the process, these narratives suggested that the objects that these people reached for to re-orient themselves were friendships and connections forged over time, not the idea of an LGBT community.

**On messiness:**

I have used the term “messiness” several times in this essay to talk about solidarities, relationships, and connections between people. I would like to spend a little time highlighting the theoretical richness of the idea of messiness. To do this, I rely on Martin Manalansan’s work on “mess as constitutive of queerness.” He suggests that “a critical reading of queer theory” opens the way to read “queer and queerness as mess and

messing up.” I intend my own readings of messiness in the politics of LGBT identities and solidarities to reflect Manalansan’s intention “to locate discomfort, dissonance, and disorder as necessary and grounded experiences in the queer everyday” (Manalansan 2014, 97). The messiness within LGBT solidarities that I became attuned to is not to be read as chaos and disorder that are impediments to activist projects. Instead, I understand my reading of messiness as a way to retain “the mundane, banal, and ordinariness of queer experience and its mercurial often intractable qualities” (Manalansan 2014, 98). I would like to anchor the messiness of solidarities and allegiances I have attempted to show in this essay as a project of queering and messing up “the neat normative configurations and patterns that seek to calcify lives and experiences” (Manalansan 2014, 99). However, it does not follow from this reading that the actors involved in my discussion revel in the queer productivity of this messiness. On the contrary, my discussion of the use of narratives of belonging as acts of clearing spaces for clarity, in fact, suggests that the members involved were engaged in the project of dealing with the messiness, of clearing it up in some way. But I read it as a provisional work of clearing up a pathway, amidst the mess, to walk through, to think through, not as a definitive process of identifying and discarding objects. The conscious recognition of the existing state of solidarities as messy led to a disorientation of sorts (a la Sara Ahmed). Narratives of belonging occurred as very ephemeral and provisional processes of clearing up the space a little bit so that people could go on relating and working together even if not everything had been set right. The instances of narration of these stories, I suggest, are akin to the times when one suddenly gets present to the clutter around, feels suddenly

overwhelmed by it, and so performs a quick and temporary clearing of a little space amidst the mess just to ameliorate the feeling of not being equal to the situation.

## **Conclusion:**

So what does this entail? We might ask, like Sara Ahmed does, what such moments can do, “whether they can offer us the hope of new directions, and whether new directions are reason enough for hope” (Ahmed 2006, 158). Does it mean that by foregrounding relationships of shared labor, these members of the LGBT community were pointing to the possibilities of a different politics that was not centered on gender and sexual identity? And might this new sense of solidarity have the potential to ask, in a sustained way, bigger questions about structural inequalities? At least based on my limited data and observation, I do not think so. Not yet.

The point I wish to make through this paper is that when faced with conflicting pulls, varied levels of visibility and state recognition, and multiple axes of privileges, disenfranchisement and suffering, some members of the LGBT community in Chennai emphasized the importance of an additional set of implicit criteria for what constitutes solidarity: showing up; doing the work; making a timely gesture of support or help; being present in a moment of crisis; having shared experiences of fun, outrage, suffering, etc. They used narratives to emphasize friendships and longevity of associations across sexual orientation, gender identity, class, caste, etc., as a way to ameliorate the anxieties created by the questioning of solidarities. My claim is not that such a focus on relationships

across social divides directly challenges or carries the potential to challenge larger social orders of gender, class, or caste in a systematic way. My desire, instead, is to focus on the very urge felt by actors involved to ameliorate through narratives the questioning of the legitimacy of the idea of a community. My aim has been to understand what attitudes to relationships and solidarities and what kinds of connections, affect, and slantedness towards one another these exercises reveal.

A question that I would like this essay to pose for my own ongoing thinking and research both as a member of this community and as an anthropologist in the making is: what kind of resources do intentional communities draw upon in times of doubt about the efficacy, truth, and meaningfulness of the solidarities that hold them together? When different allegiances are expected by existing imaginaries of communing (the idea of an LGBT community, the idea of community inspired by the traditional jamaat system, etc.) and technologies of governmentality (public health, state welfare policies, judicial interventions, etc.), what do the actors involved do? What are the processes they use to negotiate these expectations? In this paper, I zoomed in on a very micro -- almost infra-ordinary -- practice of stabilizing relationships by weaving people together through narratives of belonging. Bodies that were perceived to be aligned with themselves, bodies that were seen to have shown their solidarity over time were pulled together by these narratives into a “we” that could, at least, provisionally stabilize relationships, at least until the collectively organized Chennai Rainbow Pride month events would be over.

The Rainbow Pride march, which was the culmination of a month-long celebration of queer identities in Chennai, happened in pouring rain which all of us

welcomed with great relief and abandon in the blazing heat of the late May sun. We walked over mud and slush and puddles of water along the working class neighborhoods of Egmore in central Chennai through which the Chennai Police had permitted us to walk. Two of the aravani leaders who had initially expressed their misgivings about continuing to be part of an LGBT politics, who had been concerned that positioning themselves in that way might not be productive for aravanis, joined us at the Pride march, even though they didn't walk; they rode on a scooter alongside the marching crowd.

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